

English Grammar Secrets

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Present continuous

The present continuous is used to talk about present situations which we see as short-term or temporary. We use the present simple to talk about present situations which we see as long-term or permanent.

In these examples, the action is taking place at the time of speaking.

- It's raining.
- Who is Kate talking to on the phone?
- Look, somebody is trying to steal that man's wallet.
- I'm not looking. My eyes are closed tightly.

In these examples, the action is true at the present time but we don't think it will be true in the long term.

- I'm looking for a new apartment.
- He's thinking about leaving his job.
- They're considering making an appeal against the judgment.
- Are you getting enough sleep?

In these examples, the action is at a definite point in the future and it has already been arranged.

- I'm meeting her at 6.30.
- They aren't arriving until Tuesday.
- We are having a special dinner at a top restaurant for all the senior managers.
- Isn't he coming to the dinner?

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Present simple

We use the present simple to talk about actions we see as long term or permanent. It is a very common and very important tense.

Here, we are talking about regular actions or events.

- They drive to the office every day.
- She doesn't come here very often.
- The news usually starts at 6.00 every evening.
- Do you usually have bacon and eggs for breakfast?

Here, we are talking about facts.

- We have two children.
- Water freezes at 0° C or 32° F.
- What does this expression mean?
- The Thames flows through London.

Here, we are talking about future facts, usually found in a timetable or a chart.

- Christmas Day falls on a Monday this year.
- The plane leaves at 5.00 tomorrow morning.
- Ramadan doesn't start for another 3 weeks.
- Does the class begin at 10 or 11 this week?

Here, we are talking about our thoughts and feelings at the time of speaking. Although these feelings can be short-term, we use the present simple and not the present continuous.

- They don't ever agree with us.
- I think you are right.
- She doesn't want you to do it.
- Do you understand what I am trying to say.

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Present simple or continuous

The Present Simple is used for:

- regular actions or events
He plays tennis most weekends.
- facts
The sun rises in the east.
- facts known about the future
We leave at 8.30 next Monday
- thoughts and feelings about the time of speaking
I don't feel very well.

The Present Continuous is used for:

- the time of speaking ('now')
Shh, I'm trying to hear what they are saying .
- things which are true at the moment but not always
We're looking for a new flat.
- present plans for the future
We're having dinner with them next week .

Look at these examples :

- I don't usually have cereals for breakfast but I'm having some this morning because there is nothing else.
- I often cycle to work but I'm taking the car this morning because it's raining very hard.
- I'm thinking about having my hair cut short but I don't think my husband will be very happy about it.
- My parents live in Washington but I'm just visiting.

Note how, in all these examples, we use the present continuous to talk about events which are temporary/limited in time and the present simple to talk about events which are habits/permanent.

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Past simple

We use the past simple to talk about actions and states which we see as completed in the past.

We can use it to talk about a specific point in time.

- She came back last Friday.
- I saw her in the street.
- They didn't agree to the deal.

It can also be used to talk about a period of time.

- She lived in Tokyo for seven years.
- They were in London from Monday to Thursday of last week.
- When I was living in New York, I went to all the art exhibitions I could.

You will often find the past simple used with time expressions such as these:

- Yesterday
- three weeks ago
- last year
- in 2002
- from March to June
- for a long time
- for 6 weeks
- in the 1980s
- in the last century
- in the past

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Past continuous

We use the past simple to talk about actions and states which we see as completed in the past.

We can use it to talk about a specific point in time.

We use the past continuous to talk about past events which went on for a period of time.

We use it when we want to emphasize the continuing process of an activity or the period of that activity. (If we just want to talk about the past event as a simple fact, we use the past simple.)

- While I was driving home, Peter was trying desperately to contact me.
- Were you expecting any visitors?
- Sorry, were you sleeping?
- I was just making some coffee.
- I was thinking about him last night.
- In the 1990s few people were using mobile phones.

We often use it to describe a "background action" when something else happened.

- I was walking in the street when I suddenly fell over.
- She was talking to me on the phone and it suddenly went dead.
- They were still waiting for the plane when I spoke to them.
- The company was declining rapidly before he took charge.
- We were just talking about it before you arrived.
- I was making a presentation in front of 500 people when the microphone stopped working.

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Past simple or continuous

Both the past simple and the past continuous refer to completed actions in the past.

Most of the time when we are talking about such actions, we use the past simple. This is by far the most common way of talking about the past.

- I lived there for 6 years.
- I only found out a few moments ago.
- I asked her but she didn't know anything.
- The company made 100 people redundant last year.

Only use the past continuous when you want to emphasize the continuity of the action.

- Everybody was talking about it all evening.
- They were really trying hard but couldn't do it.
- I was thinking about you the other day.
- Were you expecting that to happen?

When we use these two forms in the same sentence, we use the past continuous to talk about the "background action" and the past simple to talk about the shorter completed action.

- It was raining hard when we left the building.
- I was reading the report when you rang.
- He was going out to lunch when I saw him.
- The company was doing well when I last visited it.

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Irregular verbs

All new verbs in English are regular.

- I photocopied the report.
- She faxed it to me.
- They emailed everybody about it.
- I googled my name and got more than 20 000 responses.

There are approximately 180 irregular verbs. You don't need to learn all of them because some of these are very rare but many others are very useful and you do need to know them.

What's the easiest way to learn them? Some people think you should learn a list 'by heart'. Others think you should not learn them at all – you will just gradually acquire them over time.

One useful method is to note down new irregular verbs as you meet them. It is useful to write these verbs (or any vocabulary you want to learn) in sentences and learn those rather than the individual word.

Which is easier to learn?

- stick stuck stuck
- I stuck the photo into my album.

Another technique is to classify the irregular verbs into 4 categories.

1. All forms the same

- set set set
- cost cost cost

2. Similar sound groups

- beat beat beaten
- eat ate eaten
- blow blew blown
- throw threw thrown
- drink drank drunk
- sing sang sung
- speak spoke spoken
- wake woke woken